For 60 Years, This International Park In Canada Has Celebrated The Roosevelts

By Jennifer Bain
July 22, 2014



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At Roosevelt Campobello International Park in New Brunswick, the tree's.

In the name of cross-border relations, I sip on King Cole orange pekoe tea from New Brunswick and eat gingersnaps connected to one of America's favorite First Families while hearing what Eleanor Roosevelt accomplished as a diplomat, activist, United Nations spokesperson and political force.

I'm doing all this in what's surely the most intriguing of the 27 affiliated areas connected to the U.S. National Park System — Roosevelt Campobello International Park.

It's on Campobello Island in Canada, for starters, and you can only drive to it from Lubec, Maine over the 627-foot long Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Bridge, stopping of course to flash your passport to customs. It's the only park in the country that has a two-ferry hop through New Brunswick the other way.



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Roosevelt Cottage, once the summer retreat for Franklin D. Roosevelt's family, is now a museum that you can visit on a guided tour (Jennifer Bain)

Run by a non-profit commission, this park calls itself "a singular example of international cooperation" and is equally funded, staffed and administered by the two nations.

The park tells the story of an American president who summered on this "beloved island" as a child beginning in the 1880s and who continued the tradition with his wife and children from the early 1900s to 1939. The showpiece is a 34-room Roosevelt Cottage — painted Roosevelt Red — but there are 2,800 acres of trails, carriage roads and natural areas to explore.

Oh, and not only is entry free but so is "the Wilth Eleanor" which is delivered twice a day in another historic cottage as a public service. Last year, the park baked 15,000 gingersnaps for it.



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Tea With Eleanor, which is free, runs daily at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. in the historic Wells Shoban summer cottage at Roosevelt Campobello International Park (Jennifer Bain

"Eleanor would always have tea at 3 o'clock no matter where she was, so that's why we have a tea at 3 also," explains tea guide Victoria Matthews. "She thought tea was a great way to converse with people, learn about what was happening, talk about what's going on in the world — so that's why we have it for you guys."

What's going on in this part of the world is that Roosevelt Campobello turns 60 this year and the main festivities run July 20 to 31. Among other things, a new trail will be unveiled.

"If you're in the area, July 27th will be the big day here at the park," promises Rae Matthews, another tea guide who, like many of the 500 people who live on Campobello Island, is a dual citizen. "There's lots of different things going on really all that week, but Saturday is definitely the big day."



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Frank Sinatra gifted this lead plaster caricature of FDR to Eleanor Roosevelt the year the 32nd president of the United States died (Jennifer Bain

I love how this park's vision is to inspire unity, understanding, respect and dignity. It wants everyone to have the "beloved island experience of recreation, peaceful retreat and stimulating conversation."

It's fun to say that Americans make up the most of the visitors, and that most Americans visit for the Roosevelt connection. Canadians, on the other hand, typically come for the lovely time spent for the nature. On my one-night trip in early July, I have time to do everything except the whale-watching trip that sells out before I can secure a seat.

Jade Robbins, who handles marketing and communications, tells me that the park delivered 225,000 visitor experiences in 2013 (I now babies experiences instead of visitors) and counts on Acadia National Park to talk it up. "They send lots of people here — it's about two to two-and-a-half hours away" she says.



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A birchbark canoe made by Passamaquoddy artist Toma Joseph for FDR hangs in the visitor center/Jennifer Bain

We tour the visitor center's permanent and rotating exhibits, where a birchbark canoe made by the late Passamaquoddy artist Tomah Joseph hangs above the reception desk. Joseph taught young Franklin how to paddle the ocean and became a life-long friend. Also memorable is a polychrome plastic caricature of FDR made by an Italian artist and reportedly given to Eleanor by Frank Sinatra.

You can only get inside Roosevelt Cottage on a guided tour and it's neat to see the relaxed side of a president. Continuing with the food theme, a vintage coal and wood stove from A. Belanger Ltd. in Montmagny, Quebec has a Canadian connection and fun backstory. It was the "President" model and a playful gift from Roosevelt's mother in 1933.

My favorite thing — other than the view of Eastport, Maine — is a huge megaphone on display in the dining room. "I like to call it the cell phone of the 1900s because Eleanor did use it to call her children at mealtime," says Robbins. More seating is in the bedroom where a feverish and weakening FDR lay with the first signs of polio in 1921 after visiting a Boy Scout camp in New York.

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This President model stove from Quebec was a gift from FDR's mother/Jennifer Bain

After Roosevelt's 1924 death, the cottage fell into disrepair and was sold to wealthy New York art gallery owners and business tycoons who ran it as a museum and lobbied senators and congressmen for the creation of an international park.

The park opened Aug. 21, 1964 and is administered by a commission created under an international treaty signed by Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson and U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson on Jan. 22, 1964. It's the only park in the world jointly managed, staffed and owned by the peoples of two countries and administered by a joint commission in their name.

Now the most frequently asked question is what time zone is the park in. Campobello Island is on New Brunswick's Atlantic time, one hour later than Maine's Eastern time, which likely explains why the park is open from 10 to 6 instead of 9 to 5.

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Standing in New Brunswick in Roosevelt Campobello International Park, you can see Lubec, Maine. Still you must cross the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Bridge and clear Canada or U.S. Customs to move between the two countries/Jennifer Bain

While the historic buildings and visitor center run seasonally from May to October, the natural area's forests, bogs, shorelines and beaches can be enjoyed year round.

To get a better sense of the 2,800-acre park's 8.4 miles of driving roads and eight miles of hiking trails, I head out from the visitor center with Campobello Sightseeing's Peter Harworth who confides "the relaxed lifestyle here on Campobello Island is just perfect for me."

The park dominates the south side of the island. At the Mulholland Point Lighthouse, we spot seals frolicking in the channel and chat with the folks running the Head Harbour Life Interpretation Centre (a collaboration between the park and the Canadian Whale Institute). We take in astounding views from Liberty Point and Friar's Head. But mostly we drive down green carriage roads that let us imagine we're experiencing this "beloved island" the way the Roosevelts did more than a century ago.



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Campobello Sightseeing's Peter Harworth drives down some of the Roosevelt Campobello International Park carriage roads/Jennifer Bain

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